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ABSTRACT

The difficulties that students with learning disabilities experience in cooperative learning activities include failure to attend to their peers, low levels of participation, inappropriate interactions with peers, and inactive learning. Three techniques are suggested to improve performance during cooperative learning activities. The first technique is application of a learning strategies approach. Training procedures include the use of preprinted index cards to help students focus on the group activity, use self-monitoring, and complete a comprehension self-check. An accompanying script is provided for use by the special education teacher to introduce the strategy cards. The second approach involves peer coaching. The students' index card for this technique focuses on understanding the group's goals, encouraging others to participate in group work, and ascertaining achievement of the goal. A script for teaching the technique also accompanies the peer coaching index card. The third procedure involves a reminder list for classroom teachers, outlining teacher behaviors found to facilitate cooperative learning activities. The list includes such suggestions as "explain what the group's finished product should be" and "teach students to self-evaluate." (JDD)

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Three Strategies That Enhance Participation
in Cooperative Learning Activities
for Students with Learning Disabilities

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RUNNING HEAD: STRATEGY CARDS

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Three Strategies That Enhance Participation
in Cooperative Learning Activities
for Students with Learning Disabilities

In this presentation, we will briefly share the results of our research regarding the difficulties that students with learning disabilities experience in cooperative learning activities. This will be followed by three approaches designed to improve the performance of these students during cooperative learning (a) self-monitoring, (b) peer coaching, and (c) teacher routines.

Cooperative learning is heralded as an accommodating approach for diverse groups of learners. When compared with traditional teaching methods such as lecture or individual instruction, small-group learning activities result in more positive peer relationships and superior academic achievement (Stevens & Slavin, 1991). However, these gains are not consistently found for all groups. Specifically, mildly handicapped students show lower achievement in cooperative learning activities than in direct or individualized instruction (Tateyama-Sniezak, 1990). In fact, many teachers of children with learning difficulties question the benefits these students receive from participation in cooperative learning (Sharan, 1980).

Teachers report students with learning disabilities have difficulty attending to their peers and participating in group projects. Ideally, the teacher facilitates the cooperative learning activity so that students interact with the material and learn from each other. However, students with learning disabilities have low levels of participation and look to the

teacher to guide learning and answer questions. When interacting with peers, students with learning disabilities often attend to comments irrelevant to the lesson.

One possible explanation for this behavior is based on the current belief that students with learning disabilities are inactive learners, that is, many of these students do not know how to learn and do not believe that the efforts that they put forth will result in success (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1991). A powerful approach for improving the responses of inactive learners is the systematic teaching of learning strategies. A strategy is an individual's approach to a task which includes how the person thinks and acts when planning, executing, and evaluating performance (Deschler & Lenz, 1989). In this instructional approach, students are taught to follow a procedure for a specific task, and then they are taught to apply that strategy when performing the task on their own. For example, students may be trained to use an outline of steps when reading a passage for comprehension or when checking for errors in mathematics computation. Then, they follow the same steps when completing the assignment independently. A learning-strategies approach may be applied as well to cooperative learning activities.

Using Learning Strategies for Cooperative Learning

In order to assist teachers to apply learning strategies in cooperative learning activities, a training procedure was developed which utilizes preprinted 3 x 5 index cards (see Figure 1) and an accompanying script. These cards are designed to help the students focus on the group activity and appropriately seek clarification on the expectations of the assignment. This learning strategy promotes a self-monitoring approach in which students ask themselves throughout the lesson if they are listening and participating. In addition, the

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technique of a comprehension self-check is introduced by having students ask themselves at the completion of the activity what they learned during the lesson.

Instructing Students to Use the Strategy Cards

Students with learning disabilities should receive the instruction in at least two settings. First, the special education teacher introduces the strategy cards to these students by following the designated script. The students then practice the technique in small groups in their resource room. Second, when it appears these students are competent at using the procedure, the mainstream teachers then teach the strategy to the entire class including the students with learning disabilities. This instruction is followed immediately by a cooperative learning activity in which all students can practice the new strategy.

Validation of the Strategy Technique

Students in a middle school were taught to use the cooperative learning strategy cards. Prior to training, students were asked at the completion of a small-group learning activity to write the main idea of the lesson and two things they remember anyone saying during class. Students with learning disabilities phrased the key idea in terms of the subject, and they remembered relevant information more frequently if it was said by the teacher, not other students. This strategy training resulted in significant changes in response patterns. After training, students with learning disabilities were more likely to phrase their main ideas using the expression "I learned that..." which may demonstrate an internalization of the activity. Also, these students were more likely to report remembering relevant information said by their peers than they did prior to training. These results demonstrate that students

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with learning disabilities who use a strategy approach can gain a better grasp of the material and of the purpose of a cooperative learning lesson.

Teachers reported that the process reminded them to clarify the goals and objectives of the lesson and to redirect questions to group members thereby reinforcing the idea that cooperative learning means students learning from each other. Another interesting finding is that a large number of students with learning disabilities and their regular classroom peers commented on the process involved in group activities and the role of the teacher. This would indicate that using this strategy training procedure increased students awareness of group dynamics and the importance of learning from peers.

Strategy I: Student with Learning Disability

When I am in a group activity, I work with group members to discuss information, solve a problem, or work on a project. I am a valuable member of the group.

1. Before beginning, I ask myself:
Do I understand the directions and goal of the group activity?
 2. If I do not understand the directions or goal of the activity, **I ask the group members.** If they do not know, I ask the teacher to explain the directions or goal again.
 3. Every few minutes, I ask myself:
Am I listening to the group members?
Am I helping in some way to complete the group activity?
 4. At the end of the activity, I complete this sentence:
I learned that
-

TRAINING PROCEDURE TO USE A SELF-MONITORING STRATEGY FOR GROUP ACTIVITIES

Introduction:

Using this self-monitoring strategy, students can learn to monitor their own participation in small group activities with the help of a pre-printed card. A group activity is defined as a learning activity in which students may discuss information, solve a problem, or work on a project in small groups. Once students learn this self-monitoring procedure, they can use their card in any classroom setting, becoming a more productive group member.

Procedure:

Begin by saying, "In many of your classes, teachers divide up the students into small groups to do learning activities. Sometimes, students get confused about what they are supposed to be doing at those times."

Hand the pre-printed card to the student and explain, "This card may help you know what to do in these activities. You can carry it to class with you as a reminder of what to think about at those times. I'd like to explain the use of the card to you as we read it together."

Pointing to the top of the card, say, "The top of the card tells what students do in group activities. Let's read it together: 'When I am in a group activity, work with group members to discuss information, solve problems, or work on a project.'"

"There are three underlined words. What are they?"

(discuss, solve, work)

"That's right. This tells you that when you are in a group activity, you might discuss or talk about a topic, such as things we do to harm our environment; you might solve a problem, like figuring out what to take with you on a trip to the moon; or you might work on a project such as preparing a report for the rest of the class on recent changes in Russia."

"Let's read the next sentence, 'I am a valuable member of the group' Sometimes members of a group don't feel that they have anything to share. The sentence on your card is a reminder that you are important to your group."

"Each time you begin a group activity, read these two sentences to remind yourself of what you might be doing and that you are important to your group."

"Let's read number 1 together. 'Before beginning, I ask myself: Do I understand the directions and goal of the group activity?'"

"This means that you should try to say to yourself what the group is expected to do during the activity."

"Let's read number 2. 'If I do not understand the directions or goal of the activity, I ask the group members. If they do not know, I ask the teacher to explain the directions or goal again.'"

"It is important that you make sure you understand what you are supposed to do. If you do not understand the directions, first ask members of your group because the purpose of a group activity is to learn to work with fellow students. Then, if no one in your group is clear about the directions, ask the teacher."

"Who do you ask first if you don't understand the directions?"

(a group member)

"Let's read number 3 together. 'Every few minutes, I ask myself: Am I listening to the group members? Am I helping in some way to complete the group activity?'"

"This is a reminder to listen to the students who are talking. This is also a reminder to participate in the group. You will get more out of these activities if you will remind yourself to listen and participate several times during the activity."

"Let's read number 4 together. 'At the end of the activity, I complete this sentence: I learned that....'"

"When you are finished with a group activity, you should have learned something. One way to check your understanding is to take a moment to tell yourself something you learned."

"Do you have any questions?"

"When would you use this card?"

(during group activities)

"Good. Let's read the card together one more time...."

Using Peer Coaches for Cooperative Learning

The literature on peer tutoring can be examined to understand the basis for utilizing peer coaches, which is a more accurate term for their role in cooperative learning activities. Beirne-Smith (1991) has reviewed a number of studies conducted on peer-tutoring and found (1) it is an effective instructional alternative, (2) tutors perform better after they have been trained, and (3) same-age peer tutors are effective. Fowler (1986) adds (1) it can be as effective or even more effective than teacher managed programs, (2) it is time efficient for the teacher, (3) the teacher role in management is reduced, and (4) it transfers to classroom activities.

Maheady, Sacca, and Harper (1988) report using peer tutoring at the secondary level in social studies. They found that peer tutoring is socially acceptable and effective for students with mild handicaps as well as the students without disabilities. For these reasons, the second phase of training, Peer Coaching, was chosen and implemented.

Validation of the Peer Coaches Approach

As a result of instructing students to use the peer coaching strategy, students in the mainstream setting showed improved participation. Both groups of students, with and without learning disabilities were more likely to report the main idea of the lesson in terms of themselves, "I learned that. . ." Students were more focused on their peers than on the teacher after training, as demonstrated by students reporting more comments made by students and fewer statements made by teachers. Finally, data showed students talked more in the group activities and that these comments were more relevant to the topic than was found prior to training.

Strategy II: Peer Coaches

When I am in a group activity, I can coach others.

1. Before beginning, I ask myself:
Do I understand the directions and goal of the group activity?
 2. If I do not understand the directions or goal of the activity, **I ask the group members.** If they do not know, I ask the teacher.
 3. **I state the directions and the goal** for the group.
 4. I ask, "**Does everyone understand** the goal of the activity?"
 5. During the activity, I ask myself, "**Are the group members paying attention?**" If not, I signal them to attend.
 6. **I encourage others** to participate in the discussion or group work by asking for their input or opinion.
 7. At the end of the activity, I restate the group goal and ask, "**Did our group achieve our goal?**"
 8. Then , I ask group members, "**What did you learn?**"
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TRAINING PROCEDURE: PEER COACHING STRATEGY FOR GROUP ACTIVITIES

Using this peer coaching strategy, potential leaders can learn to assist other students who experience difficulty with participation in small group activities, such as discussing information, solving problems, or working on projects. Once peer coaches are trained to apply this procedure, they can use their card to assist in any classroom setting, helping others to become more productive group members.

Procedure:

Begin by saying, "In many of your classes, teachers divide the students into small groups to do learning activities. However, some students get confused about what they are supposed to be doing at those times, while others seem to be leaders helping peers to understand the activity and to complete the work. Because you are one of those leaders, you have been selected for special training as a PEER COACH. I will teach how to use a card to assist you in coaching others during group activities. Remember that a good coach encourages all the participants to bring out the best in every player. You may be assigned a particular student to help. This student will be called you 'partner'."

Hand the pre-printed card to the student and explain, "This card may help you know what to do in order to coach others in small group activities. You should carry it to class with you as a reminder of what to think about or say at those times. I'll explain the use of the card to you as we read it together."

"Let's read number 1 together. **'Before beginning, I ask myself: Do I understand the directions and goal of the group activity?'**

"This means that you should try to say to yourself what the group is expected to do during the activity."

"Let's read number 2. **'If I do not understand the directions or goal of the activity, I ask the group members. If they do not know, I ask the teacher to explain the directions or goal again.'**

"It is important that you make sure you understand what you are supposed to do. If you do not understand the directions, first ask members of your group because the purpose of a group activity is to learn to work with fellow students. Then, if no one in your group is clear about the directions, ask the teacher."

"Who do you ask first if you don't understand the directions?"
(students should respond, "a group member".)

"Let's read number 3 together. **'I state the directions and the goal for the group.'** You are being trained as a leader in your group. In that capacity, you can coach the others to focus on the activity by clearly stating what you are supposed to do."

"Let's read number 4. **'I ask, does everyone understand the goal of the activity?'** Although you just stated the goal, not everyone may understand what they are supposed to do. Take a moment to make sure all group members know what to do. You may even ask others (especially your partner) to restate the goal."

"Let's read number 5 together. **'During the activity, I ask myself, Is my partner attending?'**

How will you know if your partner is paying attention?

(students may say, "eye-contact, writing, talking, or not looking out the window or not goofing off...)

You can develop a signal with your partner, such as touching your ear or tapping your paper, to remind them to refocus their attention."

"Let's read number 6. **'I encourage my partner to participate in the discussion or group work by asking for his(her) input or opinion.'** Sometimes students are reluctant to participate in groups or they might think they have nothing to share. You can help by asking for their opinion about something being discussed or by asking them which one of the tasks they would like to do."

"Let's read number 7 together. **'At the end of the activity, I restate the group goal for my partner and ask, Did our group achieve our goal?'** You can help your group to know when they have finished by asking if you have met your goal. You may have to remind the group of the original directions and goal. Be enthusiastic when you are finished by complementing the group, such as, 'We did great!'"

"Let's read number 8. **'Then, I ask my partner, What did you learn?'** This final question helps your partner to think about what was learned during the activity. Your partner will remember what was learned better by doing this. Sometimes, your partner may not know what to say (or say 'I don't know'). Help by asking questions about parts of the activity."

"Let's read the card again and then practice being a good coach."

Teacher Routines

The final procedure involves a reminder list for classroom teachers of teacher behaviors found to facilitate cooperative learning activities. This list emphasizes clearly explaining goals to students both orally and in writing. Further, teachers are encouraged to avoid the temptation of answering students' questions when peers could help. This behavior reinforces the interdependence of group members and promotes interaction among peers. The list also states that teachers can instruct students to self-evaluate their individual learning and their group's accomplishments. Finally, the strategy encourages teachers to share group products and learning, further reinforcing the idea that what is learned in cooperative learning activities is valuable and worth the attention of the whole class. Teachers may copy this list and attach it to their desk or bulletin board as a continual reminder.

Strategy III: Teacher Routines

Suggestions for directing a group activity.

1. **Write the directions** and activity goal on the board or on a poster.
 2. **State the directions and the goal** for the groups.
 3. **Explain**, "You will know when you are finished with the activity when you . . . (finish with the desired activity product)."
 4. **Divide students into small groups** that include a balance of students with leadership potential and students with need for assistance or motivation.
 5. If students ask you questions, **redirect the question to peers** (as appropriate).
 6. **Teach students to self-evaluate** by saying:
"Ask yourself if your groups reached its goal"
"Complete the sentence: 'I learned that . . .'"
 7. At the end of the activity, give groups the **opportunity to share their results**.
-

Which Strategy is Best for You?

Both strategies changed students' focus from the teacher to group members and increased student reporting comments made by peers.

Both strategies reduced reporting of unrelated comments and increased reporting key ideas in terms of "I learned that"

Self-monitoring strategy helped to train students to work in small groups and could be generalized to any mainstream classroom.

Peer coaching would be easiest to implement in a classroom that already employed cooperative learning procedures.

Peer coaching could be used to train any student to be a leader.

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